

# Correspondences

## Gascia Ouzounian and Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri

In this series of letters, the musicologist and violinist Gascia Ouzounian (writing from Belfast) and the composer Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri (writing from Berlin and Stuttgart) discuss the latter's music, touching on such topics as: graphic notation; existential therapy; collaboration and communication; "energy" and "live-ness" within musical composition and performance; and site-specific sound installation. Their discussion is supplemented with images, excerpts of scores, and video of Papalexandri–Alexandri's compositions and installations since 2005.

26 October 2012

Dear Marianthi,

Just yesterday I was speaking on the phone with a friend of mine, the pianist Matt Bourne, who mentioned your name by chance. He didn't know we knew each other; he didn't know that I had been interviewing you for a while or that I wanted to write about your work. We were talking about notation, about how, in realizing a score, a performer is normally executing a representation of the composer's ideas rather than the ideas themselves. This can be an unsettling problem for some people. I wonder if you ever find this problematic.

The first composition I ever heard of yours was *B as I eye us be*. I was at the premiere, when Scott Wilson played it at UCSD in 2005. You scored this piece for a bass player and *an imaginary performer*: an imaginary performer who also contributes, in the actual performer's mind, to the execution of the piece during the live performance. The actual performer and the imaginary performer each have their own parts; they share the same instrument, and, the actual performer plays as though the imaginary performer were also playing. I thought this was a pretty wild idea . . . not only because it asks the performer to engage with the live performance situation but to respond to a simultaneously occurring, imagined performance as well, but because it takes common experiences like listening, responding, imagining, playing with others, and interrupts these; reveals them as something other than mundane, as "givens"; exposes the private act of thinking within the public act of performing; allows the subconscious to enter the realm of the conscious . . .

I'm sure I didn't think all these things when I first encountered that work. I probably only thought it was an interesting idea and that the performance was interesting, too, but, having come to get to know you and your work over the years, I feel more confident in making this claim: that your music, to my mind, anyway, has a certain power that can only belong to that which is first broken . . . a revelatory power. I guess it's a fact, or maybe a feature of existence that, in order for something to be exposed, something else must first break or give way. In this case there are concepts, habits, behaviors, conventions, and even languages that break and give way to underlying, perhaps unexamined or unknown concepts, habits, behaviors, languages . . . I suppose this is what most critical acts want to accomplish, but are most critical acts creative like yours? I don't know.

Did you know that there is something called «existential therapy»? It is a branch of psychoanalysis wherein the therapist attempts to expose those «given facts of existence» that have resulted in some kind of inner conflict for the patient. One of those given facts of existence is, apparently, the inevitability of death. The others given facts of existence are, I think, somewhat more contentious. They are: the responsibility that comes with personal freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness. I think it could be argued that these latter are features, and not facts, of existence. Then again, perhaps our common understanding of death is limited such that we will one day have a conception that does not view death as inevitable, either.

Do you remember when we played your piece *Models* for the composition jury at UCSD? You wrote it for our group, Bye Bye Butterfly—Aiyun Huang on percussion, Kathleen Gallagher on flute, Katalin Lucaks on piano, me on violin. Well, you wrote this composition for us, and one of your premises was that you wanted to re-examine the nature of the different instruments in the ensemble: re-examine them in terms of rethinking and retooling their conventional uses, functions, appearances, relationships, and so on. You had me attach a bow hair to one of my violin strings and bow the hair, which produced this deep, rumbling sound. At another point you asked me to take the tip of that attached bow hair and move it across the strings, lightly plucking the strings with the hair. It was this very beautiful, delicate, intimate kind of sound, the kind of sound that you would imagine could only result from an act of caressing.

You also took a common action like bowing, in which the violinist typically moves the bow horizontally across the strings of the violin, and asked me to instead move the violin underneath the bow, while the bow itself remained still. Displacing the action of bowing from the bow to the violin itself unsettled the way I moved, approached and even conceptualized my instrument. I believe this was part of your intention.



Another one of your premises in *Models* was that you wanted the four players to be intimately connected to one another's movements. You wanted us to respond to, incorporate and even complete each other's actions, such that a gesture might begin in one instrument and end in another. And, you confounded conventional instrumental roles by, for example, asking the percussionist to make typically pianistic gestures on percussion objects.

So here was a composition that deconstructed conventional instrumental techniques as well as other conventions of musical language. Well, we played the piece, and afterwards, I remember the first question you were asked by composition jury, the group of composers who were tasked with evaluating your work. The first question, posed by a senior professor of composition at UCSD, an institution that is itself considered among the most established centers of contemporary music research within higher education, was the following:

*Marianthi, who are you and how do you live in the world?*

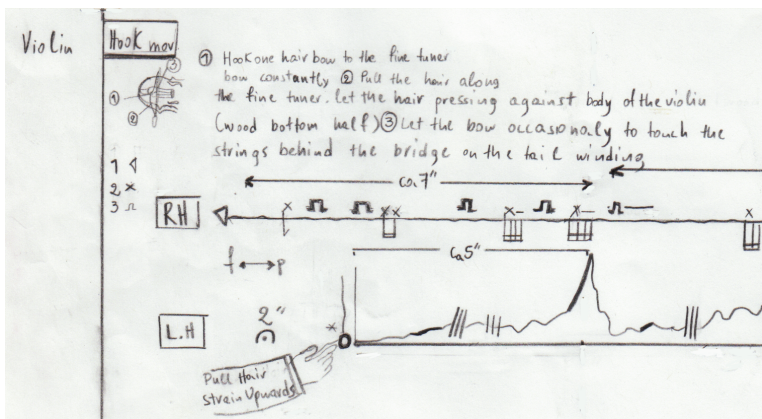
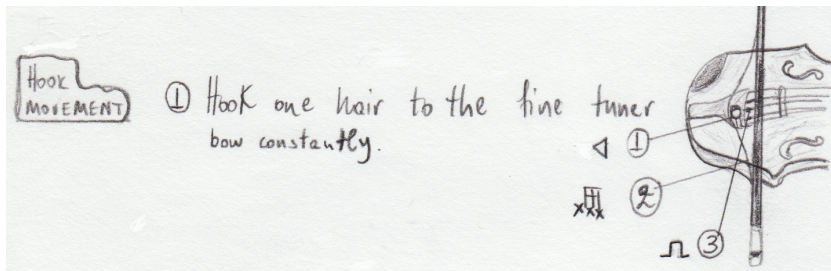
Well, Marianthi? Who are you and how do you live in the world?

This is a troubling question. At the time I thought it might be vaguely offensive, though I've come to view it more generously. If you as a composer are continuously questioning the musical conventions within which your work operates—or more broadly, if you as a person are continuously questioning the world within which you exist—how do you yourself relate to it? Probably with some difficulty.

I remember you once telling me that you arrived at composition through a somewhat circuitous route. I believe you had gone to Goldsmith's College in the early 2000's not to study composition, but to study music therapy. Knowing you as I do now, this is hard to imagine. Frankly, Marianthi, I cannot really picture you as a music therapist, although I now wonder if your compositions perform a kind of existential therapy for music itself. If we depart from the premises of existential therapy—that there are underlying facts of existence that lead to inner conflict, and that exposing and examining these underlying facts can have a positive or therapeutic effect—then I suppose we have to ask: what are the given facts of music, how can they be exposed, and what might this exposure accomplish?

I believe this question has been at the heart of many of those musical practices that we have come to associate with experimentalism: exposing the «given facts» of music in order to recover and recuperate music from those norms

and conventions that may, on some level, be damaging to music itself. Do you relate to this? I think I do. I have come to understand music not as a set of practices—acts of composition, performance, reception, etcetera—but rather as a field of relations, between people, modes of cultural production, ways of thinking, and, yes, even ways of being. Yes, more and more I think that music is a way of being in the world, a way of relating to it. If one of the given facts of human existence is the inevitability of death, is there a salient musical equivalent? Is there an inevitability of death, some kind of lack or absence that is implicit within the existence of music itself? Do we damage our lives by hastening death? Do we damage music by hastening this inevitable absence? Or do we enrich life, and music, by exposing and integrating this eventuality such that we are not «in conflict» with it? How does one integrate death in such a way that it does not diminish or destroy life?



**Figures 1–2:** Excerpts from the violin instructions and violin part from the score for *Models* (2005) by Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri. Here the violinist is asked to hook a single bow hair behind the fine tuner, and bow behind the bridge and on the body of the violin. The instructions for the Right Hand (R.H.) indicate rhythms for bowing, using the single hair, within a general time frame (i.e. 7 seconds); the Left Hand pulls a different bow hair attached to one of the strings of the violin. Thus the right hand and left hand are activating different preparations, and simultaneously operating within different time frames in this section. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri, ©2005. Audio: <http://www.marianthi.net/Audio/models.mp3>

I remember in our conversations you would often speak of an «energy» within music that you sought to foster within your compositions. You spoke, for example, of observing what is normally thought of as «extra-musical» communication between performers: eye contact, nods, breathing, etcetera. You said, «How can I borrow this energy and make it part of my music, so that there is no separation between playing and not-playing»? On another occasion, you spoke about wanting to create a bridge between your experiences as a composer and improviser: «In composition you have to strictly follow someone—a score, a conductor—be synchronized with performers. There is a kind of agony as to whether you will reach something or not. I was looking for something else: how can I create a situation, a specific kind of energy, where performers are not necessarily improvising, but can observe and react to what's there?» Still another time you said, «I like my performers to stay active all the way through while they're playing the music. I like them to maintain the energy. Quite often in concert music when people have to be silent or wait, the kind of energy they were producing or reflecting sometimes escapes very quickly . . . They're waiting for a cue to re-join the ensemble, and so on. For me, there is no gap.» And finally, you once told me that you were «attracted to sounds that were not part of the music but that came from the performer». You gave the example of a clarinetist blowing into the blowhole, and you said, «those sounds were not part of the music . . . they came with a different kind of energy. Not the energy of performing». You said that it was this energy, this kind of sound, that you were attracted to, and that it was this energy that you wanted your music to create.

For me, the energy you are describing is a kind of being alive in the world. Can life be created? Or can it only be lived?

12 November 2012

Dear Gascia

Ever since I was a student at Goldsmith's College, I have been going to libraries, looking for books about notation, looking for the right symbols. It can be really frustrating to have a great idea you're enthusiastic about, and then: what do you do with it? You have to put it on a piece of paper. And not even that. What you put down on the paper has to make sense to somebody else. If you're lucky, you'll hand that paper to a performer, and you'll have the chance to explain what it's about. In many cases you'll have to send it away, mail it, and often there's a very limited time to go through the score. So you really have to find *the* ideal visual presentation of an abstract sonic idea. It's bizarre.

## Current Musicology

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As a student, most of my questions—75% or 80% of my questions—were about notation. My professors often had reasonable, practical, and interesting suggestions, but right there I would think, “Hmm, this is great, but I wouldn’t have thought of that.”

I remember when I was working on *B as I eye us be*, the composer Roger Reynolds suggested that I look at Vinko Globokar’s scores. Then the next day he said, “No. Don’t go. Don’t take a look. You are really somebody who needs to go through a struggle. You have to find your own way.”

For years I was actually very much into *not* putting on the paper the actual sound, but, instead, notating the physical action which would lead to this sound. So it was a graphic representation of how to move, how to use the instrument, and out of this the performer would discover the sound I had in mind.

The ideal situation is creating a piece that will *not* be executing a representation of the composer’s idea. In my case I’m always looking for a way for the piece to develop and unfold in a very natural way. My intention is to create a situation wherein performers act and react. The ideal is to have plenty of time, get together, and work in the same room. When you don’t give performers a score in advance, they have nothing to rely on other than that very moment when you get together and work. One thing I always had a problem with was handing in parts. Giving out this part, that part, and so on. I never really understood this. How can you create a collaborative work, something that involves everyone, and you’re just giving out one part here, one part there? It’s very important to bring everybody together in the same room, make them aware of who is doing what. I want the performers to share the moments they’re creating together. It’s not “who is going to play the solo” or “who is going to play this part”? It’s about how what you’re doing as a performer has an impact on the other performers, and the connections between them.

I had the chance to go through this process when I worked with the percussionists Steve Schick, Ross Karre and Justin DeHart for *Kein Thema*, which Schick commissioned for the UCSD percussion ensemble RedFish BlueFish. We had almost an entire year together. Steve would give me a small case, and I would ask him to put a few instruments in the case every two weeks. I would go back home, try things out, take notes, make videos, select the things I thought should be there, and eliminate the things that I thought were less attractive. Then the four of us would come together, and



**Video 1.** The video for *Kein Thema* (2007) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri is intended to serve both as a documentation of the work, and as a notational device. *Kein Thema* aims to investigate micro-movements involved in the creation of sounds that are acoustically and visually perceptible at a close distance. Through various videography techniques, the micro-details of movements and sounds that audiences cannot normally access in the context of a live performance become perceptible. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2007. Video: [http://www.marianthi.net/Video/kein\\_thema.mov](http://www.marianthi.net/Video/kein_thema.mov)

I would explain one by one to each performer what I was trying to achieve. And there—right there—I could see the reactions. I could *sense* what should come next. Through *observation*.

When you get performers together in the same room, they learn the piece differently. They're even able to memorize it. Also, they relate to each other in a different way. They're engaged with each other as if they're connected with invisible strings. This way of working gives you direct access to what the other performers do. It's not a secret. It's there for you to access, and, somehow, this makes you more curious. It becomes a creative process.

Some musicians get extremely nervous about working this way. They feel, "what do you want me to do?" Very often they say, "why can't you just tell us in advance"?

It's important for me to be there and face one question after the other from the performers. "Is this what you want?" "Do you want to keep this?" "Why is this happening?" And so on. I think this is a way to question the basics of performance. Why do we do what we do, and why do we want to keep things,

or why do we want to change things? From these reactions, I understand more about the psychology of the performer. Their character. When you get together, you really examine not just the instruments themselves, but also the performer's habits, their behaviours. I try to point them out in such a way that this will add something to the piece itself.

In general, I treat the instruments as objects. This is something I've always been interested in: changing the conditions that will allow me to transform an object into an instrument, and an instrument into an object. I think that's one of the reasons I focus a lot on the performer's behaviour, the "how" in "how we do things". I'm very curious to know how we do things, and how the anatomy of the instrument trains a certain kind of behaviour—a bodily behaviour—but also how it trains the mind.

Gascia, I remember very well the first question I was asked by the composition jury after you played *Models*. I also remember very well the second question or comment, that the score looks more like a sketch or an incomplete score. It was a rather shocking comment for me. Right there I questioned myself: what have I done to the jury? Some of them seemed to be irritated by me, the work, or both. Why? How? *Models* is a fragile, sensitive, peculiar, friendly, beautifully notated piece. "This is not what we call a score," they said. In fact they said this to me in advance. Two or three weeks before the premiere took place, they asked me to reconsider my notation style and to turn my sketch into a real score.

I refused, because for me this didn't make sense. Graphical notation has been used for years and years now. The use of a graphical score was absolutely necessary here. Perhaps you remember there is a point where you were asked to attach a bow hair to one of your violin strings and bow the hair while trying to reproduce the melody written in the score. Of course it's impossible for you under these conditions to reproduce the melody. The final sonic result depends on your movement, interpretation, and perception. Simultaneously the other members of the quartet were asked to imitate your actions, rhythm and sounds. This process encourages the performer to listen proactively and become aware of the possibilities latent between him or her and the instrument.

My feeling was that the jury did not really know what to say about the work. Or perhaps they didn't like it. On the other hand, during and after the performance, I could sense that both audience and jury had enjoyed the piece. But maybe joy is not part of what we call academic work. A few hours after the jury I received an email from another professor who thanked me



for creating a piece that invites both audience and performer into a private, provocative sound world. I was pleased to see that someone could sense and read my artistic intentions.

Perhaps the question should not have been “Who are you?” but “Who would you like to become?” I was very confused by the jury’s question. It took me a long time to understand the meaning of that question. “You are not a composer. You are not like us. You are different.” Well, I *do* think like a composer in the sense that I bring elements together (synthesis), but I also work as a director, choreographer, and simply as an artist. I like to experiment with materials and take things apart. I am interested in the process. I always look for aspects that unify the work. So I look for connections. I want things to be related to each other, and they can be related either sonically or visually. The connections can be invisible and visible. For example, in my work *Yarn*, two string instruments are connected by a fishing line. This connector string is bowed to transmit sound between the two instruments, which now becomes a single percussive instrument. The percussionist (who bows the central string) and the two string players have to co-ordinate their bodily gestures in order to achieve the ideal sound. The fragile equilibrium that is born out of this compound instrument necessitates a heightened sensitivity among the performers, and a very particular form of listening and bodily reaction. Silence can be achieved only through the most careful sympathetic balance, reflecting an active rather than an inactive performer state. Sound is often replaced with visual energy. The performers are locked in constant physical movement. So, in this way, *Yarn* examines the conditions under which physical gesture can affect a renewal and redefinition of the most basic musical elements. It also suggests that “energetic silence” can lead to a completely transformed musical syntax. This could only be achieved through a very precise iconographic notation depicting physical gesture alongside musical function.

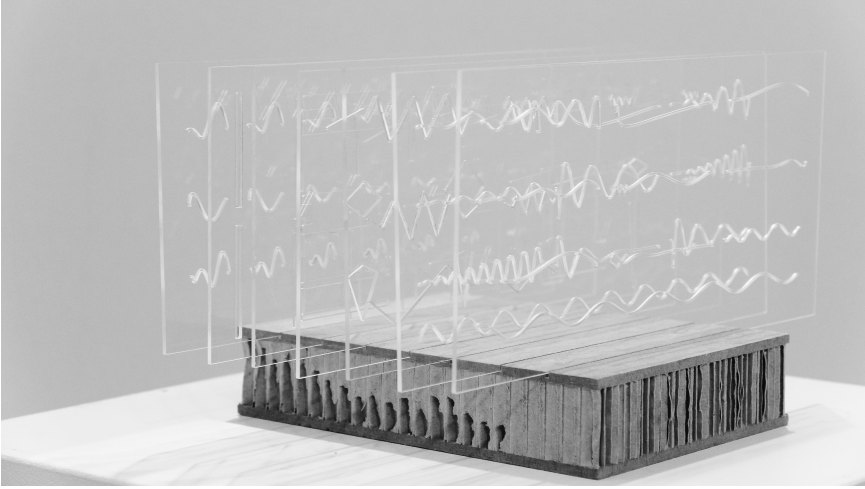
More recently I developed a specific graphic notation for *Untitled II* that was presented in the form of a written score and a clear acrylic glass template. The template here acts both as a tool to write scores, as well as a sculptural object, which I called *Schablone* (which is the German word for stencil). It is very important for me to know how things work and operate. How do they function. What is what!

## Current Musicology

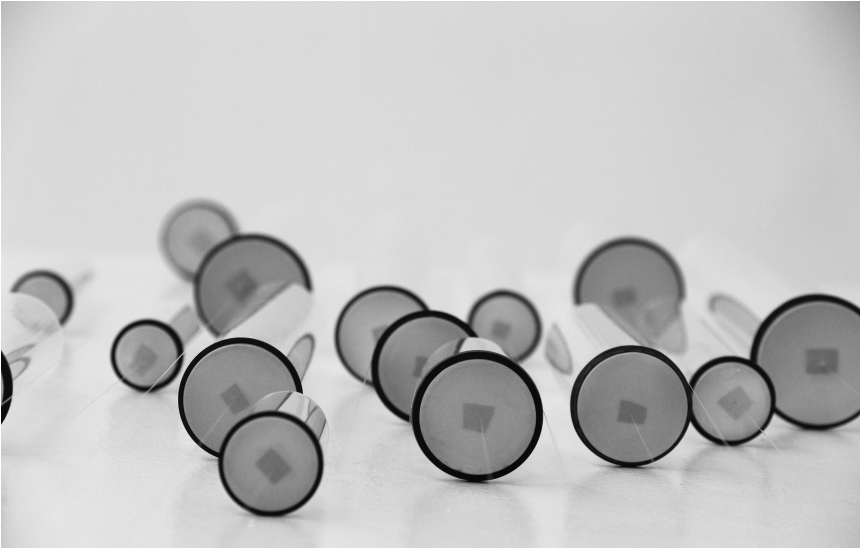
Handwritten musical score for a 12-part ensemble, including parts for Flute, Piccolo, Percussion, Violin I, Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello. The score is written on a single page with a time signature of 4/4 and a key signature of one flat. It features various musical notations, including notes, rests, and dynamic markings, along with descriptive text in the margins.

**Figures 3–4:** Excerpts from the score for *Yarn* (2008) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, for flute, piano, percussion, two violins, viola, and cello. In Section 11, the second violinist is imitating the movements of the violist, who is instructed to move a double bass peg through which a fishing line is threaded that connects the second violin and viola. The numbers above each part indicate distance from the peg to the bridge of the instrument. Another fishing line connects the cellist and first violinist, who create sustained sounds on the thread. At Section 13, the viola and second violinist pass the pegs to the percussionist, who then manipulates the pegs on the fishing line that connects those instruments. Images used by permission, ©2008, Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri.

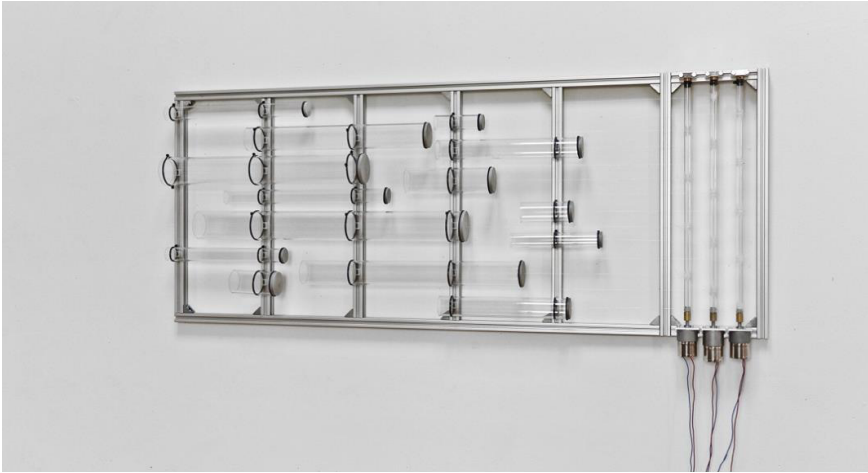




**Figure 5:** Photo of *Schablone* (2011) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri. *Schablone* is a sculpture created from the acrylic glass templates used to score *Untitled II* (2010). *Schablone* was exhibited at the Gallerie Mario Mazzoli in Berlin for their group show *Decay* (January 20 – March 12 2011). Photo by Pe Lang, courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2011.



**Video 2.** Video documentation of *Untitled II* (2010) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri. *Untitled II* builds on modified membraphones developed by Papalexandri-Alexandri as instrument that utilize Pe Lang's motor-activated devices. The sound of *Untitled II* can be influenced by manipulating the tension of the nylon lines, changing the speed of the motor, turning the motors on and off, and by depressing the membrane with the fingers while it is vibrating in order to vary the pitch. *Untitled II* can be presented both as a sound sculpture and as an instrument in the context of a solo live performance. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2010. Video: <http://www.marianthi.net/Video/tubes.mov>



**Figure 6:** Photo of a revised version of *Untitled II*, exhibited as a sound sculpture in 2012. By Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri with Pe Lang for Akademie Schloss Solitude, as part of the event *Lange Nacht der Museen* in Stuttgart, 17 March 2012. Photo by Pe Lang, courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2012

1 December 2012

Dear Marianthi,

I watched a video the other day in which the guitarist Derek Bailey spoke of improvisation as a way of “inhabiting a live situation”. It strikes me that, in your music, you also seek to inhabit and perhaps enable a live situation, that you seek to create a profound sense of live-ness. I think this is important because it points to a quality of your work that is not strictly “musical”, but that is nevertheless a fundamental part of your compositional approach. What is a “live” moment versus a “dead” one in the context of a musical composition or performance? What differentiates the two? How does one enable live-ness to emerge? The things you describe that are important to you—being in close contact with the performers throughout the process of creating a work; answering their questions—not just technical questions, but fundamental questions about things like purpose and intention; your interest in the performer’s behaviour, and their character and habits, and your idea that your music reflects these; your approach towards exposing and undermining different kinds of habits and musical training; your insistence upon developing a sense of connectedness and awareness among performers in an ensemble; your desire to create an ensemble “connected by invisible strings”—and even literal strings, as in *Yarn*; your desire to encourage the performer, as you wrote, to “listen proactively and become aware of the

possibilities latent between him or her and the instrument”—all of these things, for me, point towards something that is fundamental to your work as a composer, and that makes sense to me on an intuitive level, both as a musician who has come into contact with your music and as a listener or observer, but that nevertheless remains beyond the normal scope what we talk about when we talk about music. I am fascinated by this: the limits of discourse, how these limits arise, how they are formed, how they are breached, and what are the different factors that determine these things. What would it take for live-ness to be a commonly understood element of a musical work? Is the quality of live-ness something that could be taught or learned, or appreciated in a way that is not wholly personal? How would this change what we know or understand about music?

I know that your work began to shift in a very distinct way when you started collaborating with Pe Lang on mechanical instruments and instrument modifications for compositions and installations. The first one of these I heard in concert was *Untitled I*, which the flautist Erik Drescher premiered at the COMA Gallery in Berlin in 2009. In that performance, Erik stood at a table upon which a number of instruments and devices were assembled, and performed a series of modest actions with them . . . His performance was striking in the context of that concert, which was otherwise full of invigorating and quite spectacular works for flute; by contrast, this was relatively spare, still, and quiet . . . I remember becoming very aware of the whiteness of the gallery walls during the performance of *Untitled I*, and



**Figure 7:** Photo of preparations and devices for *Untitled I* (2009) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri. *Untitled I* uses prepared acoustic instruments (bass flute, alto and soprano flute head joint) and mechanised sound devices created in collaboration with Pe Lang, which function both as preparations and as independent musical instruments. These devices later formed the instrumental approach to a series of works that included *Untitled II* (2010) (see Video 2) and *Untitled IV (atemlos)* (see Video 3).

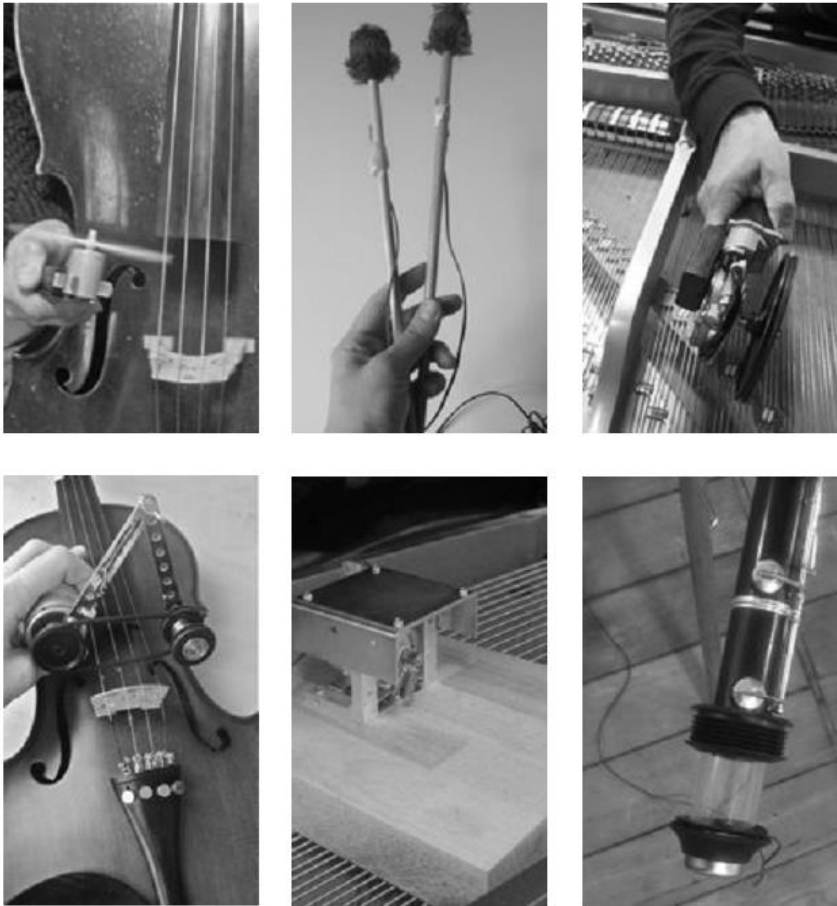
thinking that we were in a place that is typically reserved for looking and observing. For me, *Untitled I* illustrated the idea that, even in its quietest moments, music is never visually silent . . .

I know you have also created several other works in this vein: *Operator*, which you wrote for Ensemble Mosaik, which also uses motor-driven sound sources and instrument preparations; *Untitled II*, which can also function as a sound sculpture as well as an instrument in the context of a live solo performance; *Untitled IV* for prepared recorders and motors, which was commissioned by the recorder ensemble Ensemble QNG; and finally, *Extensions*, your most recent work, which is a site-specific sound installation for the Akademie Schloss Solitude. So your work has shifted from strictly acoustic compositions for standard acoustic instruments to compositions for prepared instruments, to compositions for instruments with mechanical preparations and mechanical devices, to standalone mechanical devices and sound installations. Do you think that, through this shift, you have maintained a concern for the “live-ness” of the moment or the situation? If so, how do you achieve this in the case where there is no instrumentalist, i.e. it is not up to the performer to maintain a sense of vibrancy or alertness, or perform what you called an “energetic silence”, etcetera? Can you create live-ness without the contribution of the human performer? I would be fascinated to know this.

4 December 2012

Dear Gascia,

Indeed you can. I believe that you can maintain liveness as long as your creations or mechanisms have an organic character and behaviour. To give you an example, my most recent work, *Solo for Motors and Resonant Body*, is using motors prepared with a wooden wheel and placed on different locations inside the piano (on the strings, next to the nails, etc.) in such a way that it will allow them to move, spin—to behave in a way that is similar to a live organism, producing an enormous variety of rhythms and sounds. The wheels have been modified and shaped to produce different angles, such that they come into contact with the strings in a variety of ways. At the same time the sound of the engine is amplified by the body of the piano. The performer can influence the sound by changing or operating the speed controller, which changes the engine sound of the motor.



**Figure 8:** Images of preparations used in *Operator* (2010) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri in collaboration with Pe Lang. In *Operator*, motor-driven sound devices function both as sound sources and as active preparations that determine the speed, dynamics and other musical parameters. One of the preparations developed for *Operator* (shown in the bottom-right image) consists of a Plexiglass tube prepared with an active loudspeaker connected to an iPod, and attached to the end of a wind instrument. The sound (white noise, square wave, random noise) travels from the computer through the speaker and inside the instrument, which functions as a resonant body that the performer can “play” using the keys. Lastly, the iPod is connected to a four-channel speed controller operated by the conductor. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2010. Audio: <http://www.marianthi.net/Audio/operator.mp3>



**Video 3.** Excerpt of performance of *Untitled IV (atemlos)* (2012) by Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri, performed by QNG (Quartet New Generation) at Musikinstrumenten Museum Berlin on 25 January 2012. *Untitled IV (atemlos)* extends the principal behind the mechanical device constructions used in *Untitled II* to the recorder. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri, ©2012. Video: <http://vimeo.com/39907455>

So each time either I prepare the cylinders or the blockfluten, or place the motors on the piano—or anything I do—it's a different case. I choose my materials carefully. Often they have some small imperfections so they won't presuppose perfect regularity. Therefore, they will not sound artificial or purely mechanical. This is a conscious decision. You can tell that I'm fascinated by the idea of using the same materials and objects under different conditions, and the ways in which the context can influence these materials. We carry our bodies around with us everywhere we go, but in each moment they are never the same.

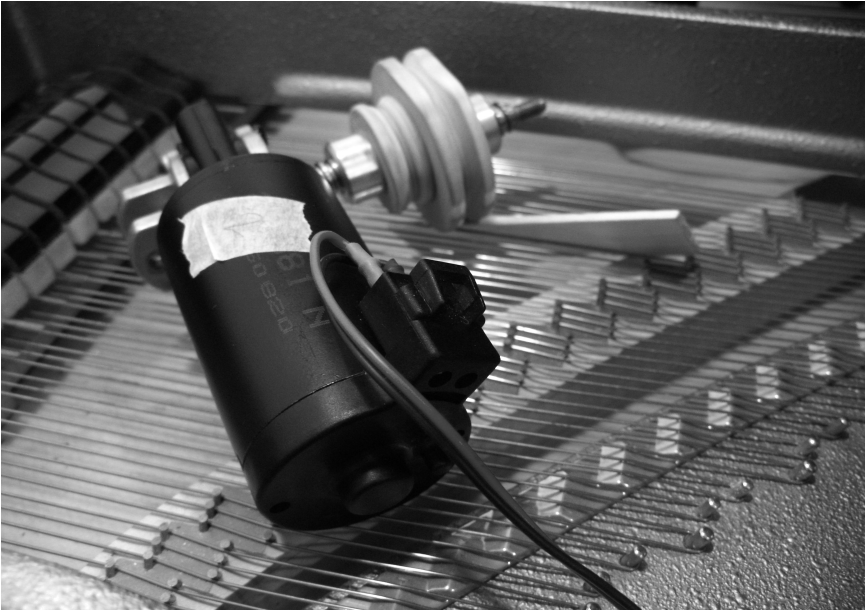
12 December 2012

Dear Marianthi,

If imperfections and irregularities are features of live-ness does it follow that there's some kind of death embodied in perfection?

I remember the cellist Charles Curtis speaking about the materiality of the instrument, and how he is attracted to the sound of materiality, say, when listening to a recording . . . As a violinist I'm also very connected to this—the instrument is in a constant state of flux, as are our own bodies, as you wrote. It took me a long time to understand that, instead of having a sound-image in my mind that I would try to make the violin adhere to, to allow the sound





**Figure 9:** The preparation with motors and wooden wheels for *Solo for Resonant Body* (2012) by Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2012.

of the violin at any given moment to reveal itself, and respond to that. I don't think of my violin as an object or a "thing", in the sense that it *is* always evolving . . . so what you describe as the organic character of your instruments and mechanical devices makes sense to me—incidentally, I believe the root of the word "organic" has something to do with the word "instrument" . . .

**organic (adj.)**

1510s, "serving as an organ or instrument," from L. *organicus*, from Gk. *organikos* "of or pertaining to an organ, serving as instruments or engines," from *organon* "instrument" (see *organ*).

**organ (n.)**

fusion of late O.E. *organe*, and O.Fr. *orgene* (12c.), both meaning "musical instrument," both from L. *organa*, plural of *organum* "a musical instrument," from Gk. *organon* "implement, tool for making or doing; musical instrument; organ of sense, organ of the body," lit. "that with which one works," from PIE *\*werg-ano-*, from root *\*werg-* "to do," related to Gk. *ergon* "work" and O.E. *weorc* (see *urge* (v.)).

14 December 2012



**Figure 10:** Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri performing *Solo for Motors and Resonant Body* (2012) at the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart as part of the symposium Rhythmanalysis, 22 November 2012. Photo by Vera Nebolsina. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri-Alexandri, ©2012. Audio: <http://www.marianthi.net/Audio/soloformotors.mp3>

Dear Gascia,

I'm glad you pointed this out. These are the exact connections I discovered in my last project, which was an installation called *Extensions*. It was a site-specific installation in a large room on the ground floor of the Akademie Schloss Solitude in Stuttgart. I used the same mechanisms as for *Untitled II*, but instead of activating membraphones or acrylic tubes, the motors activated a set of wooden panels that covered a series of windows along the walls. The panels blended with the walls, so it wasn't apparent what was making the sound—it seemed simply that the walls and the space were vibrating.

What happened with *Extensions* was that the space itself seemed to become a live organism through sound: the space was turned into an instrument, and vice-versa. Here I had the chance to be inside an instrument, an organ—it was as though the whole room had been turned into a body. It was very sensitive, and I was constantly making adjustments—it needed to be tuned





**Figures 11–12:** Video 4. *Extensions* (2012) by Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri. Site-specific sound installation with motors, steel wire, wood, and aluminum. Installed in the Unterer Hirschgang of the Akademie Schloss Solitude, as part of the group exhibition *Horch!/Listen!* (14 June – 29 July 2012). Top photo from video by Youki Hirakawa. Bottom photo by Frank Kleinbach. Courtesy of Marianthi Papalexandri–Alexandri ©2012. Video: <https://vimeo.com/56871797>

and retuned, because it would change with the temperature or according to the number of people in the space. It also seemed to be alive in the sense that it couldn't be adequately captured or recorded. It was constantly in flux. When I tried to record it I felt like one of those nature photographers who sets out to capture an exotic animal—there's very little chance of capturing it. For me this was proof that it's alive. You don't have control over it.

In thinking of working with a site-specific space, I realized that when I compose for instruments, in a similar way I have to deal with a "site-specific" situation, because the musical instrument has a specific form. You always have some parameters that are already set, and the only way for me to stretch these parameters is to modify the instrument, to prepare it, and so on. So it was a similar process in terms of working with the space itself. It made me realize that this is why some composers work with installations, or why an installation itself is not as foreign to my process (of working with instruments) as I thought. There's a connection there. Now I have access to the interior of the instrument, which is the space itself.

This is also true of the human performer, and the living body. As a composer, you have to be aware of the specific conditions of that body, and of that person. I consider this my job: to be aware of these conditions, to respond to them, to create for them—whether the instrument is an object, whether it's a space, or whether it's a person.